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THE HOMILETICAL WORTH OF THE STUDY OF HEBREW

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It is the purpose of this paper to show certain advantages which the study of Hebrew should give the preacher. There is no intent to maintain that this study is a necessity for every preacher, or that homiletic ability depends upon a knowledge of Hebrew. Courses in the science of homiletics itself will not produce homiletic ability. The preacher is born, not made. Certain studies, however, offer assistance in rendering his natural gifts more effective. The assistance which the study of Hebrew can give has been too little recognized. What, then, are the helps to homiletic efficiency which the study of Hebrew offers? In stating these advantages the attempt will be made to include only those which are practically unobtainable without the study of the language. There will remain advantages pertaining to large realms of Old Testament study which are reasonably well explored by the use of the English, though they would gain new value if approached by way of the original.

The first advantage belonging distinctly to the study of the language may be stated as the resulting development of personality. Thought leaders declare that the success of any movement hinges more upon the personality of its supporters than upon its own intrinsic excellence. Such a declaration gives increased importance to the so-called cultural studies and influences. For the man who is to sway other men there is great value in an acquaintance with a foreign language. Statesmen have long recognized this. The "detached viewpoint," the thought of "the people beyond the mountain," are sought by men of affairs. The thought of another race, the racial genius revealed in its speech, broadens any public man who grasps it. An acquaintance with the Semitic family of languages will bring conceptions new to the Aryan which he can hardly get from any language of his own family. The different verb structure, the force

of the various stems and tenses, the different meanings secured by changes in the very skeleton of a verb without auxiliaries, the uses of the infinitives, are new and instructive features. Then, with the nouns, there is the construct instead of the genitival relation, the curious building up of the nouns from the triliteral roots. The prepositions introduce new methods of thought connection. In many ways the student is impressed with the psychology of a people who could develop such a means of expression. If these unaccustomed features are viewed as phenomena of human interest instead of mere challenges for the exercise of the grammarian's ingenuity, they contribute to a new sweep of ideas, they give a new understanding of much of the Old Testament. Without some intelligent appreciation of the thought method of the Semites, the preacher finds the best commentaries on the Old Testament virtually locked against him. As a consequence he will either make the egregious mistake of ignoring that Testament in his preaching, or he will discover that he is constantly groping to reach an understanding of matters which he might have grasped with far less labor if only a part of that labor had been put upon a brief earnest grapple directly with the Hebrew. More than one busy pastor has in later years taken up this course omitted from his earlier preparation. Hebrew is here put as the representative of all the Semitic languages because it offers their advantages with as few difficulties as any of the group would present, while, owing to its history and the contents of its literature, it is for the preacher the most valuable of them all. It was through the Hebrew that the great truths of the prophets were communicated to men. The messages were of necessity conditioned by the distinctive features of that language. Merely an antiquarian interest would demand study of the media through which the messages were disclosed. A believer in a Providence which prepared the land of Palestine and developed the Greek language will see the same Providence at work through the "Semite genius for religion." He will believe that the Hebrew was providentially adapted to be the vehicle of those fundamental truths of ethical monotheism which Jesus taught as the basis of his universal gospel. If this be true, the preacher who would fully appreciate that gospel will not neglect either of the languages chosen for its transmission. This value of the language will neces-

sarily be better apprehended when we have a more sympathetic literary and aesthetic study of Hebrew. We need to get over looking at a word as an indication of J, E, P, D, or one of their multitudinous subdivisions, to cease asking whether any suspicion of this or that period exhales from the outer garments of form or construction. We need to realize that these words throbbed with human feeling, that they helped men to see God and duty. It may be that we Hebrew teachers need more frequently to lay aside the dissecting instruments and look at the language with the admiring eye of the artist rather than the calculating eye of the surgeon.

He that a lamb for love doth keep,
And not the butcher, knoweth sheep.

As a first great benefit from a right study of Hebrew may be put, then, a development of personality, the exact equal of which is not otherwise obtainable. This includes a broadening of intellectual horizon by accustoming the mind to new views and distinctions, also a deepening of sympathy as the emotional traits of another race are explored. It will include also a keener feeling for the importance of the contact of the Infinite with the human. It should mean that the man who experiences this development will have a larger humanity, and therefore be more receptive of things Divine.

The second profit arising from the study of Hebrew may be stated as a gain in precision and discrimination. Two great advantages from any language study are the gain in precision of terms—not merely in translation, but in one's own thinking—and the picture-forming power which comes from the novelty of a different expression for an idea that may be very familiar. Every studious public speaker gives much attention to his use of words. He prizes anything that will procure for him a new angle of vision upon the significance of a word or phrase. No one would claim that knowledge of a foreign language is indispensable to public speaking; yet speakers would agree that it aids nice discrimination and accurate statement. Further, they recognize that such knowledge often stimulates the imagination. Now the imagination is one of the greatest homiletic assets. Anything that arouses it to illuminative work is a new resource for the preacher. Here, again, the Hebrew exhibits some features not offered by other languages. The Greek and the Latin each had its

peculiar qualifications for the expression of particular lines of thought. The Hebrew, in its adaptability for voicing spiritual and religious truth, occupies a field of its own. Not only does it afford the imagination the vivifying influence of another language with its illuminative differences of viewpoint. It also has a unique connection with the fundamental truths of the religion which the Christian preacher is to present. Time will allow only a partial illustration of this assertion in the single case of the expression of ethical differences, though other instances might be equally profitable. Take, then, a glance at terms relating to human conduct. Because the Hebrew habitually associates distinctions of right and wrong with those between wisdom and its opposites, this view begins with terms relating to a man's wisdom or discretion.

There is the p^ṯhī, neither good nor bad, just wide open, simple. There is the kh^ṣil whose self-confidence prevents his seeing what is best, the ʔwīl, whom Dr. Holmes later named "the squint-brained" man, who is twisted himself and sees every thing askew, the ḥasar lēbh, whom we describe as "lacking," one whose moral sense is feeble or non-existent, the sākhāl who appears to be at once thick headed and pig headed. Over against such people is put the ḥā-khām with perception and discretion, the nābhôn, with his intuitive good judgment which we call insight. As a man of discrimination this one is contrasted with the nābhāl, the surly ignoramus, and still farther is he removed from the lēts, the scoffer who sets himself against all wise ways.

The wise, who possess lēbh, heart, mind, are of course associated with the ṭobh, good. The varieties of goodness are not few. The yāshār, the upright, is repeatedly commended, while the tsaddîq, the righteous, who does not deviate from the straight path, is to be had in everlasting remembrance. Evidently it was a compliment to an Israelite, as it now is to an American, to call him a "straight" man. Another phase of goodness is exhibited by the ḥāsîdh, the pious, godly, man, whose tender heart and loving acts witness his acquaintance with the God who is adored for his ḥēsēdh, tender mercy or loving kindness. The man of balance and poise who unites these good qualities is well described as tām or tāmîm, complete. This "perfect man" of our texts is no theoretical perfectionist who may

for a variety of reasons be a marked man, but an all-around, symmetrical man. It is characteristic of such men to seek in their conduct *tsédhēq*, righteousness, directness, as well as *mishpāt*, judgment, what conforms to the best sense of men, what is ethical; also to seek that which is *bōr*, clean from all defilement, that which is *tāhōr*, pure, of undimmed luster, that which is *zakh*, without fault, hence pure, unalloyed, that which is *nāqî*, innocent, free from guilt. The good man will long for the *lēbh shālēm*, perfect heart, or complete devotion which a few are said to have attained.

Opposed to the good man, *ṭōbh*, is the *rāʿ*, the evil man. This is the most common and inclusive term for wickedness. It is said to have had an original idea of violence. Other terms are derivatives from *ḥātāʿ*, to sin by failing or missing, from *pāshāʿ*, to sin by transgressing, breaking over, or trespassing against some one. The transgressor *pōshē(ā)*^c may often be characterized by *mʿrî*, bitterness or rebellion. He is the man likely to be guilty of *ḥāmās*, violence or cruelty, to act arrogantly *zūdh*, or oppressively *shādhadh*. As opposed to truth *ʿmēth*, that is firm and enduring, we find *mirmā*, the cleverly woven deceit, *khāzabh*, the cheating falsehood, *shāw*, the empty foolish falsehood, and *shēqēr*, the "short and ugly" lie. With more idea of ceremonial purity, we have terms like *tāmēʿ*, unclean, defiled, and for gross sins the expressive *shēqēts*, abomination. Remembering how the Hebrew loved to use the figure of physical directness for moral good, it is interesting to see how he calls evil crooked and describes it with abundant synonyms. *ʿAwōn* is perverseness. We translate "iniquity," but the English word has almost lost its picturesque power. The Hebrew presents the twisting, wriggling swaying of the evil-doer. It seized on words meaning to turn or to twist, and even made them into compounds whose reduplication must have supplied an element of grotesqueness or contempt. *haphakhpakh* (from *haphakh*, to turn) *ʿaqalqal* (from *ʿaqal*, to twist or zigzag), *pʿthaltōl*, twined or plaited, bring before you the dodging, sinuous course of the wicked, the man who is described as *ʾāshēm*, under penalty. Synonyms might be multiplied here, or other ideas might be unfolded with almost equal affluence of material. Enough, however, has been given to show the picturesque, imaginative Hebrew manner of presentation. One will not find in the

Hebrew the subtle metaphysical distinctions of the schoolmen, but he will find an abundance of warm, living imagery setting forth things fundamental in life. No preacher can read the Psalms or Job in the original, distinguishing the synonyms of these ideas of good and evil, without a stimulus to his own appreciation of moral values, without a quickening of his imagination which will mean more vivid portrayal of truth, more sympathetic appeal to human wills. Either of these results is of prime value to the preacher.

But someone will inquire, Why must our preacher read Hebrew to get these results? Can he not get them from translations? Only in part. Our English words have lost some of their force by familiarity; they fail to summon a picture as the original word may do. Not so well adapted at the outset for the portrayal of the moral distinctions, our English words become hackneyed till many of the words that should be potent have become mere cant. A leading writer and speaker on devotional subjects recently urged the constant study of the Psalms for the enrichment of the personal religious life, and counseled that those who could not read them in Hebrew should read them in French and German translations; or if no modern language was familiar, then let every possible English version be sought, because the unaccustomed words will so often give a view from a new angle that will reveal an unsuspected store of meaning; to quote his phrase, they "will puncture with vital suggestion the hardened familiarity of our thought and feeling." How much better to get back to the original for exact meanings rather than to rely on versions which are always marred by the inevitable inability of one language adequately to render the peculiar touches of another.

But eminent authorities have lately declared that no ordinary student can hope to make a translation that will surpass our present English versions. Let this be granted. The production of an English translation is a literary feat for which few are qualified. But give a bright man only a year's seminary course in Hebrew, and he will be going back of our best translations with satisfaction to his intellect and profit to his soul. The need of a better translation is urged alike by scholars and by literary critics who allege that no satisfactory English rendering of the Old Testament exists today. They charge that our versions are theological and technical, even

critical, rather than like the original in being warm with human passion, shot through with the insight and delicate sympathy of the authors. From another source, too, comes testimony to the inadequacy of the present translations. It is shown by the way that Hebrew teachers recommend to their classes the free use of all English translations, confident that none of them will prove a substitute for first-hand preparation, confident indeed that the use of the English will only convince the student the more of the advantage of immediate contact with the original. It is doubtful indeed if many advocates of the English versions can be found willing to go the length of saying that any existing translation does justice to the emotional qualities of the Hebrew, to those vital significances which ought to be most thoroughly grasped by one whose message is particularly concerned with life. These failures of the English are not due to mere lack of scholarship in the translators, but very largely to the essential characteristics of the two languages. The day of the translation that will do away with the study of the original is therefore very far distant.

So, in the second place, there may be asserted for the study of Hebrew a great value in its quickening of the ethical sense, in its breaking through our Anglo-Saxon habits of thought and expression, and rendering the heart and mind more responsive to the appeals of the spiritual life.

Closely akin to this is the presentation of models for the consideration of the preacher. His great point of attack is the will. Argument must be prominent in work that is to be characterized by endurance and strength, but it is not pure argument that moves the will. In the last analysis that is always the part of emotion. Upon the preacher's wisdom and ability in arousing and controlling emotion depends his success in swaying the wills of those to whom he ministers. The Hebrew is recognized as peculiarly the language of feeling, and its distinguishing qualities, as we have seen, almost defy translation into languages less adapted for such expression. Our English Old Testament furnishes many examples of noble handling of emotional expression, yet there is often a thrill and zest to the original that baffles the translators. This untranslatable element justifies the claim that the study of the original is a great advantage in the appre-

ciation of the models of emotional appeal. In this advantage is fairly included anything that in any way grips the feelings and so tends to move the will. To the formal appeals like the eighteenth of Ezekiel, or Judah's plea to Joseph, either of which loses much when Anglicized, must be added the multitude of short passages or single expressions where there lurks a power to tug on the heart strings which the English does not at all indicate. Take the language of penitent desire in the fifty-first psalm *hērēbh kabb'sēnī*. How formal is the English "Wash me thoroughly!" A study of the various translations attempted will show that it has been the despair of the exegetes to get into English the longing here implied.

If time allowed, it would be interesting to cite instances where the great preachers have used this suggestive power of the Hebrew, instances like that where Spurgeon took hold of the words *pōs'chīm-ʿal shtē s'ippīm* in Elijah's challenge, and brought out his conscience-gripping sermon on the man who limps on both sides, lame in everything he attempts because of his indecision. But most of all, this power will be evidenced in the study of the Psalms, those wondrous lyrics into which have been poured the pathos and longing of the ages, those poetic voicings of the changeless tides of varied feeling which ebb and flow in the hearts of the nations as they yearn after God. Sometimes it seems as if the new light bursting from a single psalm was a reward for all the work of acquiring this relatively simple language. But it is asked, What is the gain for the minister selfishly to grasp these visions, if, as is alleged, they cannot be rendered into English and made accessible to his hearers? They can be rendered by the man of warm heart who is willing to dwell upon them and try one expression after another, to try to present them by a whole sweep of discourse and not by a single phrase. It is the single rendition that they defy. The ideas can be brought over by the man of heart and skill. Even if they could not, there would be great gain in such an agitation of the man's own emotional life that he should feel a constraint to utter his own experience. The man full to bursting is the man of power.

Still another advantage for the student of Hebrew may be stated as the inspirational gain arising from direct contact with the ancient vehicle of inspiration. We may drop all antiquated and mechanical

doctrines of inspiration. There remains the fact that, call it what we will, these writings have conveyed a power pre-eminent in molding the lives of men for righteousness. A realization that there is no substitute for that power, and a new devotion to the book that transmits it are two of the pressing needs of our changing order. It seems to be a common notion that the ministry of the future is to be more largely administrative, that the training to equip for it should be a training in methods and machinery. The hobbies of those who would reform our seminary curricula are sociology, philosophy, literature. The study of man is dominant in the thought of these reformers. Doubtless the early church foresaw a practical ministry for the apostles, that they should become experts on famine and poor relief. The Spirit spoke otherwise. Necessary as were duties of administration they did not constitute the might of the church. Prayer and the ministry of the word were to furnish the motive power. For these activities the time of the apostles must be free. And the growth of the church, yea, its very efficiency in the relief of poverty and suffering, came not from expert differentiation of charitable methods applicable to widows of antagonistic races; but from the preaching of Spirit-filled apostles who could bring persuasion of God to bear on the life intellectual and the life of everyday necessity. Above the cry that what was needed was men of sociological training to administer the affairs of the church on a reputable business basis rang the apostolic call for a life separated to the higher things of the spirit. So today we are beginning to hear above the passionate cry for the reinstatement of the social or economic ministry of the church a clear note of demand for a spiritual ministry that can grasp the truths of God and lay them close to all the needs of humanity. This note shows the perception that what is requisite is not so much a keener knowledge of human need as a deeper knowledge of God. It is this experience of God and not any programme of human activity in alleviating distress that can transform life.

The notable opening article of the new *Harvard Review* brings one expression of this increasing conviction. This "Call to Theology" is no plea for mere intellectualism or scholasticism. Nor can such a description apply to the pleas from other communions for a ministry of power rather than of machinery. In essence they are all appeals

for a greater spirituality as preferable to a ministry of greater executive ability.

When it is queried how this increase of spirituality is to be obtained various answers are given. No method can supersede that by which the most spiritual of lives was nourished. The spiritual life of Jesus was fed upon the Scripture. Contact with that same Scripture has been the means by which the true seers of the ages have gained their power of insight and of help for humanity. The reverence for the mere book has been overdone. It is well that there is today such a revolt against bibliolatry; but there is no greater need in our time than the saturation of the Christian church with the spirit of the Book. Such an inspiriting will itself mean life put above form, life triumphant. For producing that life of power nothing can be more serviceable than the study of the men of old who felt the very breath of God in their souls, who saw deep into the things that are fundamental in all subsequent revelation.

In this study no one should underestimate any factor that brings out more clearly the exact flavor of the message, or brings one closer to the Spirit-filled men. Such a factor must be the language through which these messages came to the world. If it is worth our while to scan the history and literature of old for all that they can contribute to an understanding of the men of the spirit, it surely is worth while to grasp the methods of the language which so largely colored their utterances, to get the fresh impact of their thought, as it strikes upon the mind without the deadening cushion of familiar form or association.

Increasing importance attaches to the study of the prophets in an age which is just comprehending the social content of the gospel. The leaders in this movement for the larger application of Christianity do not hesitate to assert that in many ways the message of the Old Testament prophet comes closer to the need of our day than the message of the New Testament apostles. So far as the New Testament message concerns Christ, there can be no question of its superiority, though few have yet learned in how profound and spiritual a sense the Old Testament Scriptures testify of him and of his mission. When it comes to the application of the message, however, the prophet certainly has closer kinship in many respects to the work

of the preacher today. The apostle spoke to men under an alien rule. He counseled an attitude toward a tyrannical government. The prophet faced the men who made the government and unfolded their responsibilities. Our preachers face the men who make the government, and their message should be one of responsibility on every social and political question. For good or ill the day has passed when Christians were a persecuted folk for whom the best policy was to fear the king and consider that all government was of God. Only the moral shirk is today endeavoring to evade his share of the responsibility for what his country or city does. The enlightened Christian knows that only by blasphemous libel can many of these doings be charged to God. He knows that it is part of his business to dethrone the devil in the ward and city committee as well as in the future aeon, to see the throne of God established wherever Christian votes have influence instead of in some far-off millennium. There is one language in which are found the messages that ring truest as to God's will for social and political conditions. Ought the preacher today to slight that language, to hold back from his earnest hearers any advantage that it can give toward the fullest apprehension of the meaning of the rule of God on earth?

In the view of the writer of this paper, then, the Hebrew language is of profit to the preacher in its influence on his own life, in its effect on the content of his message, in its effect on the expression or delivery of that message, in the inspirational power which it has from its intimate association with the most spiritual messages given to the race. Advantages such as these the language offers to the man who can use them. They do not justify the claim that every minister must study Hebrew. God has other ways of speaking to some men than through language-study, natural as such study may seem for the discriminating mind. The writer would attempt no cast-iron rule. The paper states normal advantages for the normal man. Exceptional men should have exceptional training adapted to their exceptional gifts. General rules or plans should have regard to the generality of men. The paper is not a plea for specialists in Hebrew, nor that every minister should read Hebrew so many hours a day. Much nonsense is talked by excellent brethren who assume that

unless a man reads so much Hebrew every day, he loses all the good of his study of the language and proves that the time spent in that study was simply wasted. Few men not in scientific pursuits open textbooks on chemistry or physics after leaving college, but all their lives are richer and better lived for the touch of the scientific spirit, for the ability to understand scientific statements, to have a share in the great literature of science. So the plea here is that the Hebrew offers a contribution to life, an enlarged outlook, that justifies urging any man who is to be a leader in our churches to put himself in touch with this literature of religion, to equip himself at least to understand the writings of the great commentators on the Old Testament, to do this not that he may become dry and scholastic, but that through the enrichment of his personal life he may be a better minister of the life abundant.

At a recent great educational convention one speaker brilliantly protested against the tyranny of the backward third of a school class. He declared that instead of being eternally admonished to adapt his instruction to the minority of least ability, he wanted a course that considered the intellectual welfare of the upper two-thirds who for the most part were the men who were to count in after life. So far as this paper succeeds in gaining its purpose, it has in view the great mass of students for the ministry, not the men phenomenally unable to acquire a language, nor, at the other extreme, the brilliant linguist whose especial endowments enable him to gain especial profit from any language-study, but the mass of reasonably equipped, earnest, practical men. To such the study of Hebrew offers assured advantages, homiletically, and in practical personal development.